

# The Children's Milk Fund

It was 1986, during the Cold War, and I had finished my session at a large conference focused on topics related to nuclear war. It was lunchtime. I walked into the lunchroom. I noticed that former senator Albert Gore Sr. was sitting by himself in the corner of the room. I walked over and asked Senator Gore if I could join him for lunch. He replied, "Sure, general, sit down."

"Sir, I am a colonel."

"You should be a general, and I hereby promote you to that rank for the term of our lunch. What do you do in your present assignment?"

"Sir, I work in the Office of the Secretary of Defense as the Special Assistant for Air Force Nuclear Matters. That means I deal with issues pertaining to Air Force nuclear weapons."

"I have always loved nuclear weapons. General, do you want to know why?"

"Yes sir, I would!"

"In 1940 I was a young congressman from Tennessee, serving on several committees that arranged funding for public services and works. One of these was the Children's Milk Fund. This fund subsidized milk production and provided excess milk, free, to the nation's public schools. One day, Speaker Sam Rayburn called me into his office. 'Albert,' he said, 'I want you to hide a couple hundred million dollars in the federal budget.'

"No questions asked, I left Speaker Rayburn's office and immediately started putting away two million dollars here and five million dollars there. I could do so because, at that time, there were lots of opportunities. For example, there was a spike in funding for the Children's Milk Fund and for highway programs, and there were more dam construction projects than we had water to fill them. I was able to hide lots of this 'excess' money. I never stopped to ask how this money was going to be used . . .

"Then in 1945 I and several other congressmen were on a trip to the Pacific to see how the war was going. Before landing on Tinian Island [where the nuclear bombers that attacked Hiroshima and Nagasaki were based], we had flown over hundreds of warships and troop transports that were stacked up awaiting the imminent invasion of the Japanese mainland. I knew that those ships held thousands of good ol' Tennessee boys, and I knew that many of those boys would never live to see the green hills of Tennessee again. I felt extremely saddened by that prospect. When we got to Tinian, the length of the airstrip was lined with new wooden coffins, stacked 10 high.



“Upon landing we were rushed into a large briefing room. A general briefed us on plans for the invasion. He told us that in defense of their homeland, the Japanese would put up intense resistance. Casualties on both sides were expected to number millions. The general told us that three large hospitals had been built on Tinian to receive the wounded. The largest of these was a 4,000-bed hospital. [The largest U.S. hospital today is New York-Presbyterian/Weill Cornell. It has 2,200 beds.]

“We sat stunned and silent. At this point, General MacArthur strode in—as only he could do. MacArthur dismissed the other general. He looked at us and said, ‘Gentlemen, the war will be over before you get back to California.’ With that pronouncement, he left as suddenly as he had appeared. We went from stunned to confused. We thought, how can this be? Millions of casualties filling up the Tinian hospitals, and yet the war will be over before we get home?

“We departed from Tinian and island-hopped back to Hawaii. When we landed at Hickam Army Air Base someone handed me a newspaper. The banner headline read, ‘Secret Atomic Bomb Destroys Hiroshima.’

“‘The Children’s Milk Fund!’ I shouted, ‘The Children’s Milk Fund!’ My traveling companions were nonplused, to say the least.”

The senator went on to say that he (and his colleagues) had eventually hidden over 2 *billion dollars*. He subsequently confirmed this was the money used to build and operate Hanford and the Oak Ridge and Los Alamos laboratories. In other words, this was the money that funded the Manhattan Project!

“By the time we left Hawaii,” he went on, “Nagasaki had been destroyed by a second atomic bomb. When we landed in San Francisco, the headlines announced that Japan had unconditionally surrendered. The war was over. Those Tennessee boys would live to see the green hills of Tennessee again and possibly even vote for me. That, General, is why I love nuclear weapons.”

I said, “Senator, I also love nuclear weapons. My father was on one of those ships that your party overflew before landing at Tinian.”

For me, hearing the elder Senator Gore relate this history is one of those precious moments that I’ll never forget. Los Alamos was partly funded by the elder Senator Gore’s ingenuity and the Children’s Milk Fund, an interesting footnote in Los Alamos’ 71-year-history. ✨

~ Houston T. Hawkins